

Continuing education & tvet: an alternative system at the university of the south pacific

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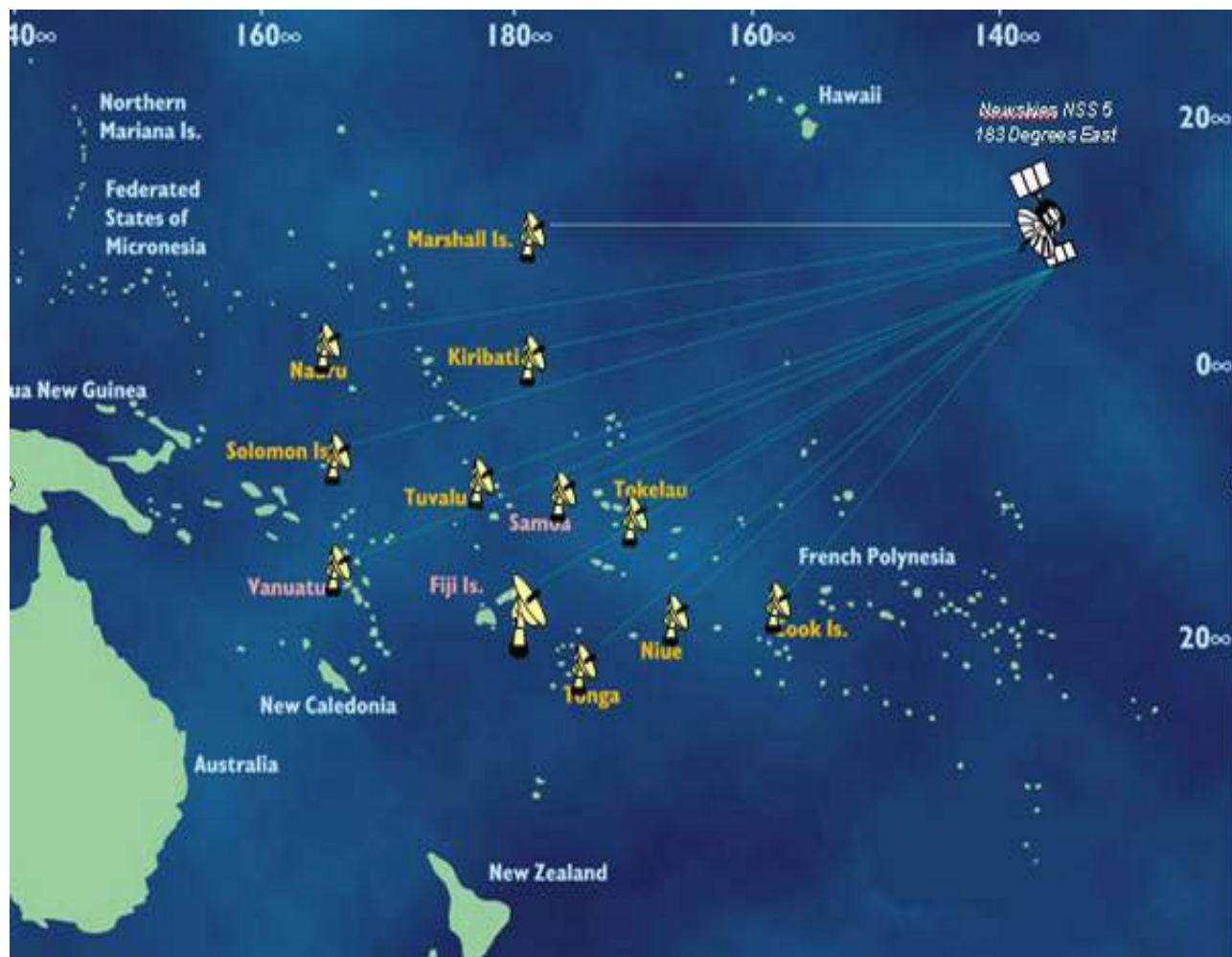
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BACKGROUND

The University of the South Pacific (USP) is one of two regional institutions in the world. The USP region that covers 12 Pacific Island countries – Cook Islands, Fiji, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Nauru, Niue, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tokelau, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu - traverses a large ocean mass and five time zones. The geographical isolation of the small island nations together with the sharp information differential in the region have made distance and flexible learning the logical and most convenient approach right from the beginning and in this new era. The map on the next page shows the wide distribution of the USP region.

The University has pioneered distance and flexible learning and teaching since the 1970s through its Extension Services. Since opening its doors in 1968, the University has shown an ongoing, deep commitment to fulfilling the challenge of providing the best quality of education for the people even as the circumstances of the region continued to change. It has been an active partner in the total development of its member countries and the region in the last forty years. With a total enrolment of slightly over 19,000 students (2008) studying in all 12 countries the University of the South Pacific is the premier provider of quality tertiary education in the region.

MAP OF THE USP REGION



This paper will discuss the systems of open schooling that exists at the USP. A combined system of the complementary and alternative forms of open schooling (Daniel and Ferreira, 2008) operates through the Continuing and Community Education (CCE) Centre and the College of Foundation Studies (CFS). In different ways the two sections provide an inclusive service by offering an alternative learning pathway to various levels of learners who failed to progress through the traditional academic pathway.

Distance & Flexible Learning (DFL) at the USP

Over the years the Extension Services looking after DFL has grown progressively and become increasingly integrated into the total operations of the University. In 2002 it was renamed the Distance and Flexible Learning Support Centre (DFLSC) in line with restructuring plans for improved services. In a further realignment and prioritizing of its activities in 2007, there was a further name change to the Centre for Flexible and Distance Learning (CFDL). Three sub-units that come under the CFDL: Distance and Flexible Learning, Continuing Education and Pre-degree Studies. The CCE Centre and the CFS have since become independent entities of the University and are now self-funding.

Distance and flexible learning is the core pedagogical concept informing the University's teaching and learning realm (DFL, 2010). DFL courses are designed for independent study. The DFL Unit works collaboratively with Schools and Departments for the design and development of learning materials and establishing environments for USP courses using a variety of modes (Bonato, 2005). From the traditional print materials of the early years, most courses are now designed for a multimedia approach to teaching and learning while some courses are totally online. DFL course development caters for courses at all level of study covering pre-degree, sub-degree or vocational and degree qualifications.

The establishment of Campuses in all the USP countries and the strengthening of the private satellite network *USPNet* and other communications are major developments that have created greater access and taken education right to the people. The mainstreaming of DFL has meant that what used to be a separate administration of distance and flexible learning and teaching has now become integrated with the rest of the University. DFL activities are now integrated with the academic activities of the faculties and it is the Deans and faculty that now drive the DFL process assisted and supported by CFDL (Chandra, 2009). USP enrolments have increased significantly over the years and DFL enrolments in particular have skyrocketed. Indeed there have been huge increases in terms of student numbers, number of courses and programs, and staff numbers and profiles. For example, in the 28 years between 1976 to 2004, there was very significant increase from the 90 students enrolled in 16 DFL courses in 1976 to the massive 15,000 students enrolled in 150 DFL courses in 2004 (CFDL, 2009). By 2005 over 300 courses were using a variety of modes including e-learning and video-broadcasts (Bonato, 2005). The University's total enrolment in 2008 was 19,146 and over sixty percent (60%) of that number were students who enrolled as flexible learners. This proportion is expected to increase further.

LIFELONG LEARNING & TVET IN PICS

In many traditional societies of the Pacific Island Countries (PICs), the learning context for the people is life in their homes and communities. People *learn by living* their role-specific tasks and responsibilities. We actively learn and grow into knowledge. More important, we learn by keeping close to village elders and people of quality (Bakalevu, 2003). They are the repositories of traditional knowledge and provide guidance and training. So education in the community is largely aimed at continuing the social order and maintaining the status quo (Thaman, 2003).

In the formal education sense, lifelong learning (LLL) is broad-based, encompassing education and training in both the formal and informal sectors (Veramu, 2008). It is broad in character, extensive in coverage and diverse in content, methodology and participants (Kedrayate, 1997; 33). The most commonly understood role of LLL is the provision of alternative education to individuals who have left school and require training for gainful employment. Some may have left without attaining the necessary school-leaving certificates and need some bridging course to fill important gaps and bring them up to standard. Others may be already employed but wish to acquire new skills to keep abreast with new times, new knowledge and new development.

In support of the EFA Goals, the (Pacific) Forum Education Ministers' Meeting (FEEdMM) in 2001 had placed emphasis on skills development in all forms of education and training. EFA Goal 3 that referred to 'ensuring that the learning needs of all young people and adults are met through equitable access to appropriate learning and life-skills programs' included education for

employability (Maclean, 2009). Teasdale (2009) suggests that lifelong learning services and effective lifelong approaches that emphasize the development of life-skills and livelihoods can actually work to strengthen the closer articulation between the different levels of education - primary and secondary school as well as secondary school, TVET and the world of work. An important thread that needs to be running through the levels is a deep grounding in local cultures and a strong sense of identity.

LLL policies in PICs are at different stages of development and implementation. Already a number of LLL projects and programs are being undertaken by different groups like NGOs, Churches and communities. The Tutu Marist Training Centre in Fiji and the *Waan Aelon in Majel* (Canoes of the Marshall Islands) or “WAM” project of the Marshall Islands are two of the most successful ones (PFS, 2007). They also resemble the alternative form of open schooling (Daniel and Ferreira, 2008). The MATUA program at Nabua Secondary School in Fiji deserves special mention in successfully providing the conventional school curriculum after hours for out-of-school learners who desire Sixth and Seventh form qualification. The School operates the conventional program during normal school hours and the MATUA program in the evenings; both programs use the same curriculum, are taught by the same teachers, and offer the same examinations. The success of the MATUA program is best exemplified by this success story:

Losalini Mawi was named Dux of the School at the Nabua Secondary School Form Seven graduation yesterday. Mrs Mawi, who is five months pregnant with her first child, was on cloud nine after beating over 50 Form Seven students for the prize. She is a MATUA Program student and was encouraged to continue her education even though she left Ratu Mara College, on Lakeba, in 1998. Mrs Mawi could not hold back her tears after her name was called.

Apart from the dux award, the woman from Vakano, Lakeba in Lau, took out the History and Best Attendance prizes. Mrs Mawi won the hearts of students, teachers and parents present when husband Timoci Mawi was asked to present her History prize. The couple received accolades after Mr Mawi gave Losalini a peck on her cheek.

Age is no barrier to education, says Losalini Mawi.

"This is another chapter of my life and I am proud that I am able to achieve the dux prize of the school. It never occurred in my dreams that I would reach Form Seven and even complete it. The Fiji Form Seven Examination is only days away and I am confident that I will do well.

I left school in 1998 after failing my Form Six exam and I settled down in the village and found a husband. But an uncle of mine, Malakai Tadulala, came over to the village and told me there was a program where I could sit my sixth form exam again. We had to leave the island and come to Suva. In 2005 I enrolled as a Matua Program student to do Form Six. I passed my Form Six exam and was last year enrolled as a seventh former. I did well, but I knew that I could have done much better, so this year I am giving it another try."

Mrs Mawi said she could not have asked for a better husband. "He has been behind me and is the one who is paying for all my education expenses.

(Source: Fiji Times, November 2 2007; page 6)

The Education Ministers Forum on non-formal education asserted that LLL “has the potential to provide a proactive learning approach as a *system, process* and *setting* and become a dynamic force for change in the Pacific” (PFS, 2007). They have called for a holistic approach to strengthen policy and resource provisions, establish constructive links between all systems, develop curriculum materials, co-ordinate capacity building and put in place quality control measures.

Speaking at a regional TVET workshop in Palau, UNESCO consultant Rupert Maclean (2009) shared the UNESCO view of education as the key to development, and TVET as “the educational master key that opens a door for any country struggling to survive” (p. 23). It is the key “because it facilitates skills development and employability”.

“If TVET training is available to all who require it, there will be a reduction in poverty, a movement towards equity and fairness, and disadvantage will diminish”, Maclean added.

TVET educational provisions are comprehensive and include apprenticeship training, technical vocational education, occupational education, vocational education and training, career and technical education, and continuing vocational education and training. Maclean called for the community to be convinced of the importance of TVET as a provider of life skills for employment and citizenship, initiative and self-sufficiency, and self employment.

COLLEGE OF FOUNDATION STUDIES (CFS), USP

The CFS that was initially called the Pre-degree Studies Unit is a proactive form of continuing education. It functions like a senior secondary school in preparing students for University study at the USP as well as other tertiary institutions locally and abroad. Its two main programs of study are:

- (i) the Preliminary Studies which is the equivalent of the Sixth form, and
- (ii) the Foundation Studies that is equivalent to the Seventh Form Certificate.

The services of the CFS are not limited only to ‘successful’ school leavers but also school-age learners who have not been successful at Form 6 and Form 7 and require bridging in a select number of courses to bring them up to par. In addition, mature-age learners wanting university entrance qualifications can enroll in the same programs.

To be more accessible to the region, the CFS uses effective delivery through mixed modes. Its tutors are subject specialists who develop course materials and support students through the normal DFL system of the University. Staff work closely and maintains close dialogue with school authorities in the region. A new dimension of the CFS that is being trialed is the franchise of its programs to secondary schools that prefer a closer alignment to University studies.

CONTINUING & COMMUNITY EDUCATION (CCE) CENTRE, USP

The mission of the CCE is to “deliver excellence in Continuing and Community education that empowers and enables individuals and communities in the region to be able to sustain themselves” (RCCE, 2009). The Centre is an important catalyst for change and acts as a bridge between the University and the community. The CCE’s role in facilitating the transition to tertiary study in the form of pre-degree studies and programs is a particular strength.

The CCE Centres in the regional campuses offer a wide variety of courses and programs that focus on life skills and work-related content. With flexibility and openness in terms of course duration, requirement and study times the CCE courses are very appealing. Generally the duration of CCE courses varies from 10 to 32 hours of teaching spread over a number of weeks. Courses cover a wide array of subjects such as computer skills, languages, bookkeeping, mathematics, business studies, economics, creative writing, community development skills, literature, handicrafts, floral arts, fabric arts, woodcarving, fine arts, carving, poetry, music, video production, leadership skills, health studies, public teaching, problem solving and general literacy skills. The courses can be classified under four major types: (i) Community ICT Courses; (ii) Business Courses; (iii) Community Livelihood Courses; and (iv) Basic Preparatory Courses.

The courses offered at the different Campuses vary depending on priority needs of the people. Some courses like the Bislama language courses in Vanuatu are specific to that country while others like the very popular IT courses are easily replicated from one campus to another. There is no denying the appeal of CCE courses to students and adults of all ages and status. A couple of stories are provided.

Basic Mechanics Course at the Tonga Campus

In December 2007, the Tonga Campus hired a lecturer of the Tonga Maritime Polytechnic Institute (TMPI) to run a 2 weeks Basic Mechanics Course for drivers and vehicle owners. In the two weeks, students were taken through five two-hour sessions of basic vehicle maintenance and care. The course was a resounding success and received positive feedback from the thirteen happy clients who previously relied on others for the service.

“I am going to be a better driver and vehicle owner. I now know something about minimizing oil and fuel consumption that I didn’t know before”, a happy participant said.

Caregiving Course at Lautoka Campus, Fiji

The Lautoka Campus in western Fiji began this course in 2007. A large number of men and women from Fiji and other PICs work overseas as caregivers and remittances are an important source of income. While for many graduates the Certificate has been the stepping stone to employment, others like Ilisapeci have found another use for it closer to home. Read her story.

Ilisapeci was lucky to have walked into a ready-made hotel job after leaving school. However, when she got married and had her first child the young mother had to leave work to look after her new family. I asked Ilisapeci about the "Caregiving Course" that she took in 2008.

"My children are big now and I have been thinking of getting back to work but it is not easy because I did not train after leaving school. Then someone told me about the Caregiving course. The person said that what I learn could be my passport to a caregiving job overseas, maybe America or Australia so I enrolled", she said.

Ilisapeci then shared how her feelings and priorities changed during the course - to forget about employment overseas and focus on an urgent need at home.

"The lectures and discussion were very useful and I kept thinking about my aged mother-in-law. Everything the lecturer shared fitted my situation exactly - that caring for her had been stressful and very difficult. I began to understand why it is difficult to take care of old people without proper knowledge and skills.

I did my 4-weeks practical attachment here at home and the tutor came to assess how I took care of my mother-in-law who is bedridden. I have shared my knowledge and skills to women in the village and other Women's groups. Maybe I will go overseas later. Right now I am happy that the course has made me a better wife, daughter and mother ", Ilisapeci said.

Horticulture, Flower Arrangement, Fish Farming ...

Dipti Mala attended one of the country's top secondary schools and aced the Fiji Seventh Form examination in 1997. She enrolled in the USP's BSc programme the following year as a private student. Unfortunately financial difficulties forced her to abandon studies and seek employment.

Dipti has worked as a law clerk since 2000. She is married and has a daughter. A keen learner, Dipti has developed a liking for short courses that teach life skills. To-date, Dipti has the following CCE courses to her credit:

- (i) Stages 1-3 in Flower Arrangement
- (ii) IT Course in Databases, Web design, and Graphic design
- (iii) Stages 1 & 2 Landscaping

CCE REGIONAL PROGRAMS OF STUDY

The newly restructured Regional Continuing and Community Education (RCCE) Centre at the main Laucala Campus in Suva also coordinates regional non-credit Certificate Programs from time to time through distance and flexible learning. These are the Certificate in Early Childhood Education (CECE), the Certificate in Disability Studies (CDIS), the Community Workers' Certificate (CWC) and the Basic Preparatory Program which are accepted by employers and tertiary institutions.

Minimum entry requirement for all four programs is a Form 4 (Year 10) level of education. Each program comprises three full-semester courses that students can complete in 3 semesters.

Currently only the CECE program is still being offered. There continues to be a big demand for it in light of Early Childhood Education now formalized as the first stage of school learning systems. There are provisions for graduates of the CECE to proceed to the formal Diploma in ECE and the BED (ECE) In-Service programs at the School of Education. This clear way forward is a big factor in the success of the CECE. The Certificate in Disability Studies (CDS) has not received the same level of enthusiasm. The current feeling is that 'mainstreaming disabilities' means that disability studies should be part of the training of all teachers and not confined to a separate group of specialist practitioners. The future of this program and other disability programs seem uncertain. Nevertheless many leading practitioners of early childhood education and disability care throughout the PICs are graduates of the CCE Centre and had trained through the CECE and CDS programs. The next stories come from three graduates.

Certificate in Early Childhood Education (CECE)

John Keniwa'ia & Laiza Rodi Keniwa'ia (Solomon Islands)

John Keniwa'ia runs the Early Childhood Education Consultancy Agency in Honiara, Solomon Islands. He employs two teachers who work with him to offer a variety of services that include general consultation and awareness programs. He also runs a kindergarten in the complex. Where he is today is a far cry from the young man from Malaita Province who was forced to leave school in 1982 because of family problems. He was in Form 2 at the time.

"After leaving school I stayed home to help look after my brothers and sisters. Then I worked as a clerk for the Council of Chiefs in my province of Malaita, taking minutes and writing reports for them. I also applied to the Malaita Education Board and in 1993 they gave me a teaching job. They gave me a three-year contract to teach Class One in a local primary school".

I asked John what and how he taught without formal teacher training. His reply was, "I just relied on memories of my own learning in Class 1, like $1 + 1 = 2$." When that teaching contract expired he left for the capital Honiara, in search of stable employment. In 1997, while working as a waiter in a hotel he learned about the USP and was elated that with his background he could actually enroll in a university program.

"I chose the Pre-School Certificate that was offered by USP and completed it in 1998. I like ECE because it was new and different. Also, I had helped take care of my brothers and sisters before and it was OK. I felt confident about my future", John said.

John became ECE teacher at a local public school. "I was happy to be a trained teacher", he said. Assured that his career was established, John enrolled into SICHE's Certificate in ECE in 1999 and completed it in 2000. John Keniwa'ia has not looked back since and is now established as a leading ECE educator and consultant in the Solomon Islands. Along the way he met his wife, Laiza Rodi, herself an ECE educator. They share the same passion.

Laiza Rodi Keniwa'ia spent the most part of her early years working with the Sisters of the Anglican Church. In 1997 this young woman from Guadalcanal Province enrolled into the

The experiences of the husband-and-wife team of John and Laiza Keniwa'ia testify to the realities of education in the Pacific region and the way CCE de-mystifies the perception of a university.

Certificate in Disability Studies (CDC)

Etonia Waqa, Fiji

When Etonia Waqa began sixth form at secondary school, he had his sight on big things. The common belief was that once you get to Form 6 you are safe! The reality though is the very opposite - every year the highest number of failures, for Fijian students anyway, is recorded in the Fiji School Leaving Certificate (FSLC) that students sit at the sixth form. Etonia left school in 1998 with no clear plans for the future.

Etonia's real break did not come until three years later. In 2002 someone introduced the young man to Hilton Special School in Suva. His first day at the school changed his life.

"I was struck by the different disabilities. They affected me and I wanted to help".

Straightaway Etonia began attending evening classes in Sign Language at the school, and one thing led to another. In 2003 Etonia Waqa enrolled into the CCE Centre's Certificate in Disability Studies.

"I did not think I can get into USP because I failed FSLC in Form 6. Only the students who pass FSLC can get to University. I was happy about my study because it is new in Fiji. I know of people with disability in my village and I wanted to help them".

Etonia was in awe of his new knowledge. He had found his vocation. Etonia was on top of the world when he graduated from USP in 2004. The following year hea went for Practicum at the Fiji Vocational Training Centre for People with Disabilities. He impressed them so

It is students who make the programs. The stories in this paper are only six of the several thousand voices who have benefitted from LLL courses and programs that offered them a lifeline. The realities that these graduates express reflect both the conflicts and hopes that they and many others experience. By listening to what they say we have an opportunity to change a stalled system that works only moderately well for many students and not at all for some. The conversations are intended to stimulate thinking and move us toward positive action.

CONCLUSION: RETHINKING LIFELONG LEARNING & TVET IN PICS

Dropouts are becoming a stark reality of our school systems and schools have limited resources to cater for them. The numbers are increasing and the faces are getting younger. The reasons for this are many: (i) There are far more primary school-leavers than available places in secondary schools so the dropouts are getting younger; (ii) Opportunities previously available to students to repeat a class in order to prepare better for the next level up are diminishing fast; (iii) National policies for compulsory education are more concerned with keeping students in school and off the streets for a few more years without clear provisions to ensure useful, worthwhile learning that will provide for practical living after school. Fortunately help is available to the region in many forms. Strengthening TVET activities, innovative capacity building of teachers and developing open educational resources are proactive starters.

Research has shown that students involved in TVET courses at secondary level have far lower drop-out and repeater rates than students in the pure academic streams (Maclean, 2009; 35). However, instead of simply focusing on curriculum choice Maclean suggests a total curriculum reform that includes a reform of teacher education. It is true that “good schools require good teachers” (Delors, 1996). The need now is for innovative teacher training that integrates the areas of material development, learner support and the use of ICT (Daniel and Ferreira, 2008; 10). TVET and Open schooling have the advantage of being less expensive compared to the conventional school system (Daniel and Ferreira, 2008; Maclean, 2009). A TVET curriculum offered through open schooling approaches has the potential to change a stalled system that works only moderately well for many students and not at all for some.

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